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ABSTRACT

During the last decade many school systems began to define minimum levels of competency for their students and to construct tests to measure whether students had achieved these minimums. Many states have passed laws which require high school students to pass minimum competency tests in order to graduate. This digest overviews four areas of controversy that have arisen from minimum competency testing: accountability; social issues; instructional implications; and psychometric issues. Minimum competency testing has been seen as a method of holding schools accountable for graduating literate students with at least basic skills. Because of the historically greater failure rate of some minority groups, opponents of minimum competency testing have characterized it as a racist means of denying educational credentials to minority groups. Instructionally, these testing programs must be based on taught objectives and must have remedial programs available to students who fail. Because minimum competency tests are used to make decisions having serious consequences for students, they must be psychometrically sound and conform to or exceed quality standards set forth by the testing profession. (BS)

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MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

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During the last decade many school systems began to define minimum levels of competence for their students and to construct tests to measure whether the students had achieved these minimums. These minimum competencies usually included the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic and their application. The term "minimum competency testing" has acquired special meaning from this activity. Considerable controversy arose when, in 1976, the State of Florida passed a law which required high school students to pass a minimum competency test in order to graduate. Many other states now have similar laws. The controversy has centered on the following issues.

ACCOUNTABILITY

During the nineteen-seventies there was considerable criticism of the schools and accusations of lowered achievement. To many, minimum competency testing was seen as a means of holding the schools accountable for graduation of literate students who would at least be able to perform the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. All students would be tested for minimum competencies and failures would be remedied before graduation. Students who were unable to remedy their weaknesses and pass the test before graduation would be given certificates other than high school diplomas.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Minimum competency testing was seen by some as social policy. It was argued by Cohen and Haney (1980) that it was another in a long line of educational minimums which began when elementary education was made compulsory, followed periodically by increasing requirements for formal education. Previous minimums have been phrased in terms of age or years of schooling. Cohen and Haney point out that while the establishment of official minimums has the appearance of equalizing achievement, history shows that it merely initiates a new competition for superiority.

Minimum competency testing has also been characterized by its opponents as a racist means of denying educational credentials such as high school diplomas to minority, and particularly Black, students. This argument is based on the historically greater failure rate of Black than White students on these and other academic achievement tests. Proponents of minimum competency testing argue that this is a means of identifying achievement deficiencies and insuring that all students receive a basic education to which they are entitled.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Some implications for the instructional program associated with a minimum competency testing program are:

- --The testing program must have curricular and instructional validity. The test items must be based on objectives which are taught to every student.
- --Remedial instruction should be made available to students who fail the test prior to their retaking it.
- --Minimum competency testing programs are generally associated with instructional systems technology. The remedial programs and, indeed, the general instructional procedures typically incorporate the use of behavioral objectives, diagnostic testing, and efficient and focused instructional programs.

PSYCHOMETRIC ISSUES

When minimum competency tests are used to make decisions having serious consequences for students, the psychometric properties of the test scores become especially important. Individuals who have been denied high school diplomas on the basis of minimum competency test results have sued the educational system. They charge that the use of inadequate tests constituted violation of the

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due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Therefore, users of such test results should insure that the testing program conforms to or exceeds the standards of quality set forth by the testing profession. This includes adherence to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests published jointly by the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education (1985). The following criteria are especially important for minimum competency tests.

--The tests must have content, curricular, and instructional validity; i.e., they must test material which has been taught to all the students.

--Students must be given adequate warning of new standards for graduation.

--The tests must reliably assign students to the categories of pass or fail.

--The passing score representing the achievement of minimum competency must be arrived at rationally and the level of skill it represents must not fluctuate from one test administration to another.

--The test must not contain items which are biased for or against any racial, ethnic, religious, sex, or other group through characteristics other than the measurement of stated instructional objectives.

--Absolute security of the tests must be maintained.

--Test administrations must be standard at all testing sites.

PRESENT STATUS

Minimum competency testing continues to be widely used; however, the legal challenges and controversy surrounding it have tended to subside. Several states have recently initiated testing programs which measure levels of achievement beyond the basic skills within their minimum competency testing programs.

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